

# Strict dad, doting Tok Det

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“MY father the prime minister is a normal, affectionate father who has not had much time for his family because of work but he uses the time with his family as well as he can,” says Marina (*pix below*), the eldest child of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

So when the family gets together, politics, government-related issues and other “heavy” topics are taboo subjects.

“When he is with us, he wants to relax so we do not want to bring anything really serious up or it will spoil the time we have.

“We tell funny stories about his grandchildren, what they say, what they did, he is quite amused by all that,” she says, adding that no matter what “he is always an affectionate and loving father”.

But now that Mahathir is retiring after 22 years as prime minister, Marina is looking forward to theirs being a normal family again.

“It sounds nice to be a normal family again – hopefully – and not have to be in the public eye or be publicly accountable all the time,” says the 46-year-old mother of three.

When her father was appointed PM in 1981, she felt the family was a bit unprepared to be turned into the top family in the country overnight.

“Sometimes, I still go ‘Gosh. My dad is the PM.’ But suddenly it’s 22 years,” she says in an interview.

She had been reading the SMS messages from the people paying tribute to the PM and was quite surprised that she found them really touching.

Marina is a businesswoman, writer and heads the Malaysian AIDS Council. She has no plans to enter politics and considers herself more of an observer. Expectations too would be very high if she were to follow in her father’s footsteps so it is easier to avoid it altogether. Brother Mokhzani was active in Umno Youth before but has since left the scene.

“We were told by our father very early on that we can join politics but we will get no help whatsoever from him. For my dad, you have to prove yourself.”

Some people may dream of being in her shoes but for Marina there are a whole lot of disadvantages that come with it.

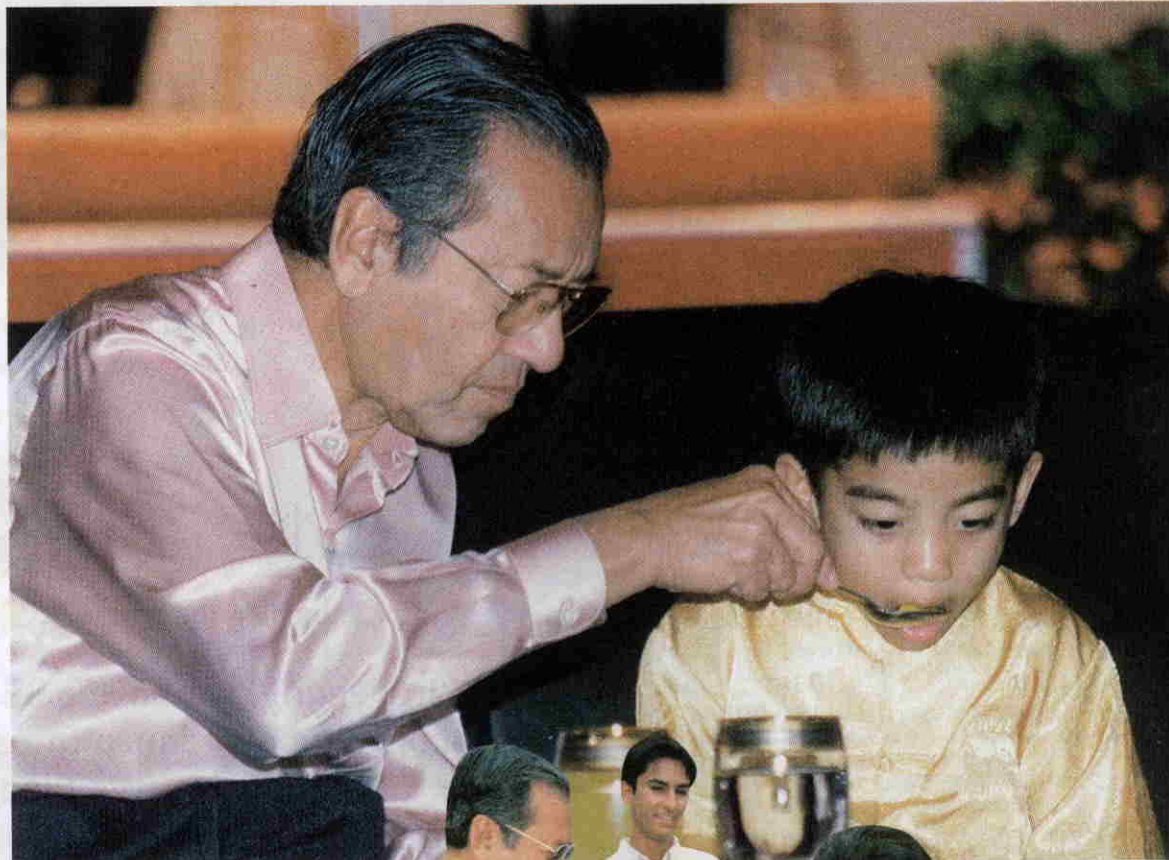
“We felt like we (the family) had to give up quite a bit to let him be PM. I am not saying that we are ungrateful for the 22 years. It has been in many ways, a very good 22 years.”

But there were frustrations as they try to lead their own lives out of their father’s shadow.

“People like to read into our actions for all sorts of political implications or whatever. Like when I write, if it is an opinion which is different (from his), they think there is something to that. If it is the same, they also think there is something to that.

“It is not me, for myself and that is tough because the reference is always to him,” says Marina.

Like her father, Marina is not afraid to speak her mind. They are both known for being outspoken and frank about certain issues,



Doting grandparent ... feeding his grandson Muhamad Mirzan (above), Mahathir and wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali enjoy the company of their children and grandchildren (left).

Mahathir in his speeches and Marina in her writings.

“I agree that the approach seems to be the same but,” she stresses, “we don’t necessarily come to the same conclusions.”

Both tend to approach things in a very logical and rational way and often find it difficult to understand why, when people are not being logical.

Even with his own children, Mahathir will listen only if something makes sense to him.

“Basically it teaches us not to say things for the heck of it,” she adds.

Both also get impatient when people are slow in catching up with

them. “We feel there is so much we want to do quickly.

“But we realise we must not run too fast, take time to explain and bring everyone along with us. I think that comes from him too.”

Another trait that comes from her father, she says, is the desire to seek knowledge and to learn all the time.

Marina is proud of her parents and believes they are incredible role models for anyone, considering their achievements. In the early 50s in Alor Star, her father was the only Malay doctor in their hometown and her mother was the second Malay woman doctor in the country.

She describes her parents as very close and affectionate.

“I think they are each other’s best friends. I do not think they could do without each other at all. He is very dependent on her for many things.”

For her, they are also role model parents especially in instilling a strong set of values in their children but more than that, trusting them to live those values.

“That is the type of parenting that we all want to emulate. I think a lot of times parents don’t trust their own kids and it means that they don’t trust themselves that they had given a solid enough foundation,” says Marina who is married to Indonesian photographer Tara Sosrowardoyo.

As a father, Mahathir was a strict disciplinarian.

“We are very fond of him but also very afraid of him because he is the one who does the disciplining. He is not beyond spanking or caning so we have to make sure we toe the line when it comes to certain things.”

Those things were usually related to education. Not wanting to go to school or missing school is a major crime.

Her parents were also very particular about manners and being polite to elders regardless of who they are.

“Even if they are just servants or gardeners. If we were ever rude to them, they could complain and we would get punished,” says Marina.

However, Mahathir’s 15 grandchildren, most of them under 10 years of age, can get away with anything with their grandparents. They fondly call him Tok Det. (Det is short for Mahadet, the Kedah Malays’ rendition of Mahathir). They are quite used to seeing him on TV and they can call him at Seri Perdana any time.

They love their grandparents and when one of them heard Tok Det will no longer be PM, she was so worried for him she called Seri Perdana seeking an explanation. He returned her call and after giving the six-year-old niece of Marina his reasons for retiring, the next question he got was, “But, Tok Det! Where are you going to live?” She calmed down only after being assured that Tok Det has a home after Seri Perdana.

While Mahathir had wielded the big stick with his own children, he now treats his grandchildren with kid’s gloves.

Illustrating her dad’s “double standards”, Marina recounted another incident.

“At that time my daughter was still a baby. She was being naughty so I just spanked her a bit. Wah, suddenly I hear my dad scolding, ‘Don’t touch my granddaughter!’ *Amboi!*,” she recalls candidly.

The whole family will probably go on a holiday soon and everyone is eagerly waiting for Tok Det to decide the place and time.